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‘We wrapped the guns in plastic bags’

by Piero Gleijeses

Cuba's Revolutionary World by Jonathan Brown

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‘We were absolutely convinced that we had discovered an infallible method to free the people,’ a close aide of Che Guevara's once told me as we talked about Cuba's support for armed struggle in Latin America in the 1960s. When Fidel Castro seized power in 1959, levels of poverty and exploitation in Latin America seemed to meet what Marxists called ‘the objective conditions’ for revolution. As a senior US intelligence officer pointed out, the victorious Cubans viewed Latin America ‘as a tinderbox to which one merely had to apply a spark ... to set off the revolutionary explosion’. This spark would be the foco, a small guerrilla vanguard whose purpose was to launch armed struggle in the countryside, just as it had in Cuba, creating the necessary ‘subjective conditions’ – an awareness among the people that they could and should fight. Castro wanted the armed struggle to start immediately.

Castro's analysis of how Batista had been removed – and therefore of what it would take to achieve revolutions elsewhere – overlooked several key factors in the Cuban situation, three of them decisive. First, when he and a dozen guerrillas reached the Sierra Maestra, in December 1956, there was already a peasant base ready to support them. Furthermore, a strong urban underground was able to provide Castro with weapons, supplies and fighters. Finally, his assurances that he was not a communist gained him the support of conservative Cubans who opposed Batista, and mitigated the hostility of the United States. But the victorious Cubans ignored these facts; they were mesmerised by the foco. ‘We have demonstrated,’ Guevara wrote, ‘that a small group of men who are determined, supported by the people, and not afraid of death ... can overcome a regular army.’ This, he believed, was the lesson of the Cuban revolution.

It echoed throughout Latin America. ‘The Cuban revolution ... was like a detonator across the continent,’ a leader of the Venezuelan Communist Party remarked many years later. ‘It validated the impatience of the revolutionaries, and it put an end to the old discussion about geographic fatalism: the belief that revolution in Latin America, the backyard of the US empire, was doomed to fail. In one fell swoop, the Cuban revolution swept away that canard.’ Inspired by Cuba's example and by Castro's call to arms, guerrillas became active in Venezuela, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Peru and Argentina.

‘The germ of revolution,’ Castro asserted, ‘is not carried in submarines or ships. It is wafted instead on the ethereal waves of ideas ... the power of Cuba is the power of its revolutionary ideas, the power of its example.’ The CIA agreed. In July 1961, it reported that ‘Castro's shadow looms large because social and economic

conditions throughout Latin America invite opposition to ruling authority and encourage agitation for radical change.' Cuba, however, did not rely simply on the power of its example. 'By 1961-62, Cuban support [for revolution] began taking many forms,' the CIA noted, 'ranging from inspiration and training to such tangibles as financing and communications support as well as some military assistance.'

My knowledge of Cuba's revolutionary offensive in Latin America is based on conversations with Cuban and Latin American protagonists, including – after two decades' knocking at the door – a five-hour tête-à-tête with Castro in June 2015; as well as on documents from the US, the USSR, the GDR, Canada and Britain. Cruelly lacking, however, are Cuban documents. Over the course of my twenty years of research in Havana, I was allowed to make copies of 16,000 pages of documents (many are now online), but they mostly concern Castro's policy towards Africa, the subject of books I published in 2002 and 2013. Cuba's Latin America files remain closed, a problem that has bedevilled every researcher, and it has left gaps in our understanding of Havana's revolutionary offensive. For instance, we lack reliable data on the number of guerrillas who were trained in Cuba. We do know, however, that very few Cubans took part in guerrilla activity on the continent during the 1960s: Havana's revolutionary fervour was tempered by its instinct for self-preservation and Castro didn't want to give the US a pretext to invade; he understood that sending Cubans off to fight in Latin America would be far more provocative than bringing in hundreds of Latin Americans to the island for training. Between 1961 and 1964 only two Cubans fought in Latin America (both in Argentina), and no more than thirty during the rest of the decade. The same caution governed the dispatch of weapons: Cuba, the CIA noted in 1964, 'generally has avoided sending arms directly to other Latin American countries'. Instead it routed them through Algeria, as Ahmed Ben Bella recalled many years later: 'Che Guevara relayed a request for me from Fidel. Since Cuba was being closely watched, it was virtually impossible to send arms [from Cuba] ... to Latin America. Could Algeria help?' Ben Bella was happy to. Venezuelan revolutionaries were among the first beneficiaries of this arrangement, a senior Cuban intelligence officer, Ulises Estrada, told me. His colleague, Darío Urrea, added: 'We wrapped the guns in plastic bags and put them in barrels of olive oil.'

From 1961 to 1964 the degree of Cuban involvement in the guerrilla wars of Latin America differed from country to country: the Cubans planned the 1963-64 insurgency in Argentina and selected its leader, but they were barely involved in the 1963 uprising against the regime that had deposed the left-leaning Juan Bosch in the Dominican Republic. Yet even there the psychological impact of the Cuban revolution – not only as inspiration, but also as a form of moral pressure – played an important role. In the early 1970s I interviewed several leaders of the 1J4 movement, which launched the 1963 uprising. The story they told was about young men who, in the wake of Castro's triumph, had gone to Havana as though on the haj. Eager to impress their hosts, they exaggerated the strength of the 1J4, even though some of them were painfully aware that their group was too weak to launch an armed struggle. The fear of disappointing the Cubans haunted them. 'We cannot back out now. We have promised the Cubans. We have assured them that we are ready. What would they think? We'd be taken for cowards.' And so, in November 1963, ninety members of the 1J4 went to the mountains to begin the revolution; within a few weeks many had been killed, and the remainder captured.

By the following year Castro was facing a string of defeats in Latin America. The most spectacular was the failure of the guerrillas in Venezuela to disrupt the 1963 presidential elections. Guerrilla uprisings in Peru, Argentina, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic had been crushed. In every case the modest support that Cuba could afford – a few weapons, a little money, some training – paled by comparison with the aid Washington lavished on Latin America's security forces. Cuban support for armed struggle in the region angered the Soviets: the Kremlin wanted to expand its commercial and diplomatic ties with the very governments Castro

was trying to overthrow. While US policymakers publicly lambasted Castro as a Soviet puppet, intelligence analysts quietly pointed to his refusal to accept Soviet advice and his open criticism of the Soviet Union. Castro spoke of the Kremlin as dogmatic and opportunistic, niggardly in its aid to Third World governments and liberation movements, and over-eager to seek accommodation with Washington. 'If they gave us any advice, we'd complain that they were interfering in our internal affairs,' Raúl Castro later remarked, 'but we didn't hesitate to express our opinions about their internal affairs.'

In 1966 Cuba embarked on its most serious attempt to launch armed struggle in the hemisphere. Bolivia, the linchpin of this ambitious plan, would serve as a beach head from which the guerrillas would fan out to neighbouring countries. Sixteen Cubans left for Bolivia with Guevara. The CIA called them Cuba's 'first team' and noted that Bolivia was 'a land of chronic political and economic instability' with a combative labour movement and inept security forces, presenting 'an ideal background for a liberating guerrilla movement'. The insurgency lasted only a few months, from March to October 1967. Guevara was wounded and captured on 8 October and murdered the following day. The US government had said that his fate should be left to his Bolivian captors, knowing that he would be killed. Guevara's death, and the defeat of the guerrilla movements in Venezuela and Guatemala, forced Castro to accept that you couldn't ignite armed struggle in Latin America with a handful of brave men. By 1970, US officials remarked, 'Cuban assistance to guerrilla groups and other efforts to export revolution had been cut back to very low levels.' Havana continued to support some guerrilla groups, like Uruguay's Tupamaros, but it had become more discriminating, and more discreet.

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Much has been written about the relationship between Castro and Guevara. I believe that they were very close, and that Guevara consistently acted as a loyal lieutenant, carrying out policies – in Africa and then in Bolivia – that had Fidel's imprimatur. Yet I have no conclusive evidence: once again the absence of Cuban documents rules out certainty. I was hoping that Jonathan Brown's study would fill in some frustrating blanks. Cuba's Revolutionary World is divided into two parts. The first examines the insurgency against Castro that developed in the early 1960s. Armed and abetted by the CIA, anti-Castro rebels engaged in urban terrorism and guerrilla raids in the countryside. The last embers of this heterogeneous force – which included former members of Batista's security forces, landowners, peasants urged on by the Spanish clergy, as well as former Castro supporters fervently opposed to communism – were extinguished in 1965. Brown covers familiar ground, adding many details drawn from US documents and exiles' testimony. Overall his account is balanced, but at times he slips badly. His discussion of the disappearance of Camilo Cienfuegos, the Cuban army's chief of staff and one of the revolution's foremost leaders, is deeply misleading. Cienfuegos was in a small plane that plunged into the sea in October 1959 and was never recovered. Brown devotes three pages to the speculations of 'Fidel's detractors' who maintain that Castro was responsible for Cienfuegos's death. There is no evidence to support this accusation, and Brown marshals no counterarguments. He leaves us pondering 'the unanswered questions about Camilo's death', even though they reside only in the fevered imaginations of people who loathed the Castro revolution.

The second part of the book looks at Castro's 1960s policy of exporting revolution to Latin America. Brown warns that until historians gain access to the key Cuban archives 'we will never know what US intelligence analysts got wrong.' His smattering of documents from the archive of the foreign ministry – newspaper cuttings and such like – are of marginal significance and shed no light on Cuba's policies or those of the revolutionary movements abroad. It is hardly his fault that he interviewed none of the protagonists; he is writing about events

that took place fifty years ago. But he is left scanning the guerrilla movements of the 1960s from a great distance. The contrast with Richard Gott's *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America* (first published in 1971) is striking.

Brown's grasp of US policy, with all its subtleties and contradictions, seems uncertain too. On the overthrow of Argentina's president Arturo Frondizi in March 1962, he writes first that 'following a few expressions of lament, the Kennedy administration recognised the military-imposed government,' then in a later chapter that the administration slapped sanctions on the Argentine military as a result of the coup, and later that 'Kennedy had already grown weary of supporting democrats like Frondizi.' 'In mid-1963,' he tells us, 'President Kennedy apparently was changing his mind about supporting Latin American democracies at all costs.' In fact, Kennedy's support for democracy in the region had always come with significant qualifications. From the outset the administration was haunted by the possibility that a handful of guerrillas could set Latin America ablaze. 'The fear in Washington was really intense,' Kennedy's national security adviser McGeorge Bundy told me in 1992. 'There was the idea that the situation was potentially very explosive and could spread.' Kennedy's answer was the Alliance for Progress: the US would provide massive aid to Latin America and ask the region's elites in return to introduce a programme of social reform to alleviate the misery of the masses that provided such fertile ground for communism. The administration promised to support democratic governments because, it stated, democracy was the best antidote to communism.

Castro was thus the midwife to the Alliance for Progress, but the success of his revolution also led to the alliance's undoing. Kennedy believed that the threat posed by Castro was pressing, but realised that the alliance's programme of economic aid and social reform needed time to work. In the interim, therefore, the US decided to strengthen Latin America's most repressive institutions, its military and security forces, which in turn reassured the elites that there was no need to enact social reforms. In his book *The Most Dangerous Area in the World* (1999), Stephen Rabe pointed out that Kennedy's support for democratic presidents in Latin America was contingent on their 'unflagging allegiance to its Cold War policies'. This is why he refused to defend Frondizi when the Argentine military moved to overthrow him; why he destabilised the democratic government of President João Goulart in Brazil; why he turned his back on Juan Bosch in the Dominican Republic; and why he gave the green light to a military coup in Guatemala in 1963.

What drove Cuba's revolutionary offensive in Latin America? Brown says that declassified US documents indicate that 'the motivation for spreading revolution abroad resided in Havana's continuing struggle against the internal and external counter-revolution and against the intransigent, unyielding hostility of the United States.' I agree with Brown that US intelligence reports are a valuable guide to the reasons for Cuba's bold posture, and I'm impressed by the quality of US intelligence. Certainly, the reports stress self-defence against the US as a key motive behind Cuba's support for armed struggle, but they have little to say about the 'continuing struggle against the internal and external counter-revolution'. That wouldn't have made sense: Havana's revolutionary offensive in Latin America peaked in 1966-67 – that is, after the counter-revolution in Cuba had been crushed. My own research in the Cuban archives suggests that US intelligence was correct. As Cuban offers to explore a *modus vivendi* with the US – in 1961, 1963 and 1964 – were rebuffed, Castro became convinced that the best defence was to go on the offensive. Attacking the US directly would have been suicidal, but assisting revolutionary forces in Latin America and Africa would gain friends for Cuba and weaken US influence. 'It was almost a reflex,' Víctor Dreke, a key aide of Guevara, told me. 'Cuba defends itself by attacking its aggressor. This was our philosophy. The Yankees were attacking us from every side, so we had to challenge them everywhere. We had to divide their forces, so that they wouldn't be able to descend on us, or any other country, with all their might.'

Yet this isn't the whole story. Brown is quick to recognise another motivation, which he describes as 'a religious calling'. In report after report US intelligence analysts were eloquent about what they called Castro's 'sense of revolutionary mission': he was 'a compulsive revolutionary', a man with a 'fanatical devotion to his cause', 'inspired by a messianic sense of mission'. He believed that he was 'engaged in a great crusade' to help free the people of the Third World from the misery and the oppression that tormented them. The evidence I have gathered in the Cuban archives squares with the conclusions of US intelligence. Self-defence and revolutionary idealism, then, were the twin motivations of Havana's revolutionary offensive in Latin America in the 1960s.

This would change in the 1970s, when Kissinger opened secret negotiations with Cuba in order to normalise relations. In a meeting on 9 July 1975, Cuban and US representatives discussed a series of steps that could lead to fully bilateral engagement. But four months later, Cuban troops landed in Angola to defeat a South African invasion that had been encouraged by the US. Self-interest would have required that Cuba refrain from intervening if the growing rapprochement with Washington was to be safeguarded. But Castro understood that the victory of the Pretoria-Washington axis in Angola would have tightened the grip of white domination over the people of southern Africa. 'We could not let the South Africans get away with it,' he told me when we met. The anti-apartheid struggle was 'the most beautiful cause'. Even Kissinger acknowledged that he was 'probably the most genuine revolutionary leader then in power'. Angola marked the start of a new phase of Cuban revolutionary activism abroad: only thirty Cubans had fought in Latin America in the 1960s, but over the next two decades tens of thousands of Cubans fought in Africa. As Nancy Mitchell explains in *Jimmy Carter in Africa* (2016), which draws on important documents in Havana, 12,000 Cuban soldiers arrived in Ethiopia in 1978 to defeat a Somali invasion of the Ogaden, encouraged by Washington. Brown is right to think of Castro's revolutionary idealism in the Third World as 'a religious calling': tens of thousands of Cubans remained in Angola through the 1980s and changed the course of history in southern Africa.

Note from the Dowson Archives editor:

This valuable assessment of the Cuban intervention in Africa from 1975 to 1991 by Piero Gleijeses should be put into the text of the context of his major contribution to the Wikipedia entry on "The Cuban Intervention in Angola" (highlights are included in the archive at W19-1975). Note also his January 2014 essay "Why South Africa Loves Cuba" appears on this archive as well.

However, perhaps comrade Gleijeses is too close to his subject to have appreciated fully one aspect of this prolonged Cuban military intervention, which had scant publicity or in the West from imperialist media, or adequate analysis also in the press of the revolutionary Left in Latin American and Europe - particularly that Trotskyist Left which suffered major crises as a result of its aborted orientation to guerrilla warfare 1974 -1980s - but that's another story.

Surely the extent of the overwhelming US military threat - repeats of the Bay of Pigs and the constant expectation of major invasion by US forces along its vast shores - and of course its proximity to multiple American air bases - its extreme vulnerability to devastation - made the creation of a permanently on alert Cuban armed forces an urgent priority - above all the need to keep this force ready for action, and to develop its recruitment and skills to the highest degree possible - all this huge expense to the blockaded Cuban economy - made Castro's decision to "not let South Africa to get away with" attacking Namibia and Angola - for him, this "most beautiful cause" - was the logical step for Cuba - a means of preserving effective instant mobilization of forces adequate to deter American military adventure.

The tens of thousands of Cuban troops in Africa could be deployed back to Cuba at the first hint of American or expatriate mobilizations for invasion of Cuba. The small but highly motivated, battle-hardened Cuban military force, would be - and apparently were in hindsight - effective defence of the revolution against US-sponsored mercenaries and what else - Black G.I. conscripts? Another failure after the Bay of Pigs would be unthinkable, and might alight the entire South American continent against the US - a fact that the Pentagon and White House were acutely aware of.

Thus the given cost of an inactive home army was transformed into the cost of forging a force for the defence of Cuba's, and by extension Latin America's, sovereignty.